UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/1998/NGO/46
16 March 1998

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-fourth session
Item 10 of the provisional agenda

QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS IN ANY PART OF THE WORLD WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO COLONIAL AND OTHER DEPENDENT COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES

Written statement submitted by Reporters Without Borders, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[6 February 1998]

Situation concerning freedom of the press

1. More than half of the 185 States Members of the United Nations do not respect the freedom of the press. In the past 10 years, over 600 journalists have been killed worldwide in the exercise of their profession.

2. Since January 1992, 57 journalists have been killed in Algeria in attacks attributed to armed groups claiming to be acting in the name of Islam. No independent inquiry has been conducted into these murders even though serious doubts persist about the persons who ordered some of them. At the same time, two journalists "disappeared" after being abducted by the forces of law and order. The authorities are also responsible for at least 24 cases of imprisonment of journalists, 40 cases of detentions and 58 measures involving seizures, suspensions or bans.

3. In Belarus, after the coming to power of President Lukashenka, the situation regarding freedom of the press further deteriorated in 1997. An opposition newspaper, Svaboda, has been banned, one Russian television correspondent has been expelled and a second correspondent incarcerated.

4. In Burma, the authorities prohibit all independent media. Six journalists are still being detained in very harsh conditions and have reportedly been subjected to ill-treatment.

5. In 1997, the Cameroon of Paul Biya remains the most repressive French-speaking country of Africa in terms of press freedom. An arsenal of laws has made it possible to incarcerate seven journalists. Three other journalists have been sentenced to prison terms in 1998, including the director of the independent newspaper Le Messager, Pius Njawé, who was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for an article reporting on the President's heart condition.

6. In Asia, one must not forget China, where 11 journalists are still imprisoned, having been sentenced to terms ranging from three years to life imprisonment. The press remains under the orders of the Chinese Communist Party.

7. The change of power at the head of the former Zaire, on 17 May 1997, has brought no change for the press: the many detentions and expulsions of foreign journalists by President Mobutu have been succeeded by cases of incarceration and acts of repression by the Government of Laurent-Désiré Kabila. Seven journalists were imprisoned in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and at least 20 others detained in 1997. On 25 November, 10 journalists were whipped by police officers for covering a press conference given by the leader of an opposition movement. During the month of December, military personnel broke into and looted the offices of the magazine Elima, and took over the premises of the monthly Le Moniteur de l'Economie.

8. Cuba is the only Latin American country where there is no press freedom. The journalists of the independent news agencies - which still have no legal status - are treated as "traitors of their homeland" and imprisoned. In 1997, Lorenzo Paez Nuñez, of the Independent Press Bureau, was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment for "defamation of the police" and "contempt". Bernardo Arévalo Padrón, founder of the Línea Sur Press agency, was sentenced

to six years' imprisonment for describing President Fidel Castro as a "liar". Also in 1997, 13 journalists were detained and 28 interrogated or threatened by the State security services. Five others were forced into exile after having been imprisoned.

9. In Ethiopia, 20 journalists are currently in detention and as many others have been released on bail. The four main private weeklies have been closed by the Government of Meles Zenawi. Many independent journalists are forced into exile.

10. In Mexico, 3 journalists were killed, 30 others were assaulted and 11 threatened in 1997. Most of them had been investigating cases of corruption, drug trafficking or abuse of power. Paradoxically, although the Mexican political system is becoming more democratic, the number of assaults and threats against journalists continues to grow. Politicians, military personnel in the areas of conflict (Chiapas and Guerrero), public servants and drug traffickers have attacked journalists on numerous occasions. Despite the recommendations made to the local and federal authorities by the National Human Rights Commission, the perpetrators of such crimes continue to enjoy the same impunity: five killings of journalists since 1995 remain unpunished to this day.

11. In Nigeria, the regime of General Sani Abacha clamped down still further on the private press in 1997: 90 journalists were arrested, assaulted or threatened, four times as many as in the previous year. As of 31 January 1998, 13 journalists had been imprisoned, 4 of them being sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. This deterioration of the situation runs counter to the process of democratic transition that the regime of General Sani Abacha says it wants to complete by August 1998, in time for the presidential election.

12. Turkey still has the worst record for attacks on the freedom of the press. In 1997 alone, about 20 journalists were tortured in custody. More than 250 of their colleagues were detained or imprisoned for varying lengths of time. Reporters Without Borders is furthermore investigating the case of 91 journalists who are all currently in prison.

13. Viet Nam does not respect freedom of the press. Controls on the press were tightened by the Vietnamese authorities in 1997. Six journalists are being held in labour camps, mostly in the same quarters as common criminals. Doan Viet Hoat, who formerly managed the magazine Dien Dan Tu Do, was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in 1990, after being held in detention, without charge or trial, between 1976 and 1988. He is incarcerated in the Thanh Cam prison for "serious offenders", isolated in a ramshackle hut and forbidden to read, write or even communicate with other prisoners. His crime was to have peacefully advocated democracy and respect for fundamental rights. His sight has reportedly deteriorated greatly because he has been unable to obtain new glasses. He has received no visits since January 1996. One of the other journalists currently in detention in Viet Nam is none other than the former editor-in-chief of the official economic newspaper Doanh Nghiep. Nguyen Hoang Linh made the mistake, in the spring of 1997, of reporting cases of misappropriation by the Vietnamese customs authorities. On that account, he has been imprisoned without trial since 8 October 1997.